

"If Holden Caulfield were a twenty-seven-year-old woman living in L.A., this is the book he'd write, or read."

—DAVE EGGERS

# GOD- SHAPED

When I was twelve, a fortune-teller told me that my one true love would die young and leave me all alone...

# HOLE

a novel

**TIFFANIE DEBARTOLO**

## READING GROUP GUIDE

1. In many ways Beatrice chooses to hide, from her relationship with her father to her mother's wealth. How does she develop over the course of the book to be a more open or accepting person, and to what extent does that influence come from Jacob?
2. Jacob and Beatrice fall in love very quickly. In what ways did they connect immediately, and in what other ways did you observe them grow with each other?
3. Did this book bring back any memories of your first love, in whatever form it was? If you feel safe, please share your story.
4. What do you believe to be the most important quality of love, and where did you see that appear in this book?

5. Discuss the backdrop of the book, a hard and rotten-sweet world of shallow socialites, concrete highways, and salty beaches. How important was Los Angeles to the story, and in what ways were both Jacob and Beatrice a reflection of their setting?
6. Family is an important theme in *God-Shaped Hole*. How does family, in whatever form, shape Beatrice and Jacob? How would you define “family,” and what is the most important element they bring?
7. Jacob and Beatrice’s plan to move down south seems idyllic, if a bit risky. Do you believe this would have been the right choice for them? If not, what scenes in the book or character qualities point to difficulty?
8. Discuss the significance of Jacob’s death and his determined quest to experience life as vividly as possible. In what ways did he hold himself back? Do you wish you were more attuned and aware in certain aspects of your own life?
9. How did Beatrice step out of line by forcing a reunion with Jacob’s father, or do you believe this was the right push for her to make?
10. When Jacob disappears to wander by himself, Beatrice is

nearly driven mad with worry. What did you think about his attitude when he returned?

11. *God-Shaped Hole* was first written in 2002, before social media and much of the culture on the Internet. Would you have been able to tell if you hadn't known? How would the story have been different if it were written today?

A CONVERSATION  
WITH  
THE AUTHOR

***God-Shaped Hole* was first published in 2002. Fifteen years later, does it read any differently to you?**

When I finished writing *God-Shaped Hole* in 2000, I knew it by heart. I mean word for word. My husband and I used to play this game—he would pick up the manuscript, read a random sentence from a random page, and I would recite the following paragraph in its entirety. (Truth be told, I could have recited whole chapters, but I didn't want to show off.) Fifteen years later, it was as if I were reading the book for the first time. There were characters and scenes I didn't remember at all. But what surprised me the most was how emotionally jarring it was to read after all this time. I came across lines that hit me in the gut. I laughed and cried and reexperienced all the feelings I'd had when I wrote the book. I was moved by how much I loved the characters and the story. They've really stood the test of time for me.

**When was the moment you thought you'd be an author, and how has your life changed since then?**

I don't know if there was a specific moment, per se, when I thought, "Hey, I'm going to be a writer." But that's probably because for as long as I've been able to read, I have loved the written word and have used it as a way of expressing myself. Writing was just something I *did*. I was sort of an antisocial kid—a bit of an introvert, if a super-opinionated child could be described as an introvert. I often preferred being alone to being with other kids my age, and my favorite way to spend Friday night as a teenager was to stay at home, read books, listen to music, and write. Much like Jacob, I kept numerous notebooks where I would jot down thoughts, stories, poems, and ideas. I also had teachers who encouraged my writing with a lot of positive feedback, and I'm sure that gave me the confidence to keep doing it. I guess being a writer was something I knew I would always do, because it allowed me to explore situations and emotions and say and do things I couldn't otherwise say and do as comprehensibly. But I don't think I knew I would do it professionally until I sold my first screenplay. That's how I officially began my writing career—writing screenplays—mainly because they seemed easy to write. It wasn't until I took a writing workshop with Tim O'Brien, who wrote one of my all-time favorite books, *The Things They Carried*, that I decided I was going to focus on novels. He was super complimentary of my work, and when one of your favorite writers tells you that you should write novels, it's a good idea to believe him and do it.

**How much of Beatrice came from your own personality, and how have you grown closer (or farther away) from her since the book's initial publication?**

This is a difficult question to answer because I am a vastly different person today than I was when I wrote *God-Shaped Hole*. I suppose when I was writing the book I might have been more similar to Beatrice than I am now. I would describe her as a younger, more anxious and insecure version of me. I definitely have better parents than she did. But Beatrice was often a slave to her insecurities in ways that I'm not. Especially now that I'm in my forties. For the most part I've got my shit figured out. I know who I am and what I want from life, and I try not to worry about things I can't control. (It only took forty years to get here!) I'm also one of those people who can find the good in almost anyone, and I think that at least early on in the book, Beatrice was the opposite of that. She'd been let down by people she loved and that led her to assume the worst. But deep down she believed in love, and that's probably the biggest thing she and I have in common. We'd both give it all up for love.

**Los Angeles is an important backdrop to this story. What made you choose this city in particular?**

The city of Los Angeles is basically a character in this novel. At times during the writing process I thought of it as the antagonist of the story. I was living in Los Angeles when I wrote *God-Shaped Hole*, and, like Trixie, I wanted to be somewhere else. I'd ended up

in L.A. because I'd been working as a filmmaker and screenwriter, but I realized quickly that I didn't feel at home in Hollywood. The culture of the movie business wasn't the future I envisioned for myself. At the time, Scott and I were just about to get married and were planning to move to Boulder right after the wedding. We ended up living in Colorado for about eight years. Now we're back in the San Francisco Bay Area, and not surprisingly, my next book takes place here.

**The book ends before the publication of *Hallelujah*. How do you envision the book living on?**

When I think about the publication of *Hallelujah*, I have this image of Beatrice riding the subway in New York City, sitting across from some cute hipster who's reading the book. He's got a pen in his hand and he's underlining all the cool parts, and she is simultaneously smiling and wiping tears from her eyes.

In my overly optimistic imagination, the book was a smashing success among smart, interesting literature fans and was subsequently turned into a film starring a young, sensitive actor who would go on to win an Oscar for the title role.

**Did you write any alternative endings for Beatrice and Jacob? In another dimension, or another life, would you want their story to be different?**

Spoiler alert: Don't read the next paragraph if you don't know how *God-Shaped Hole* ends!



There was never any possibility of an alternate ending to this book. I knew how it was going to end before I wrote the first sentence and nothing I could do was going to change that. What's funny about writing is that even if you want your characters to make different choices, especially in matters of life and death, you can't. I remember writing the scene where Jacob walks into the ocean after the party, watching my hands typing what was happening and thinking, *Don't do it, Jacob! Don't go in there! Trixie, stop him!* But you get to a point in storytelling where you sort of switch to autopilot. Once you get to know the characters well enough, they take over. They have minds of their own. They do what they're going to do and you're powerless to change their destinies. It's a gift, really.

**Fate is a central theme in this book and cements the story from the very beginning. Would Beatrice's story have been different had she never met the fortune-teller? Do you believe in fate, or do you make your own destiny?**

I definitely believe in fate. But I think my definition of fate *is* the making of one's destiny. To me, fate lies in our hands. Fate is a result of our choices. Of course we are at the mercy of the actions of others, but more than that we are the culmination of our decisions, every significant and seemingly insignificant decision, for better or for worse. And that means I don't think Beatrice's life with Jacob would have unfolded any differently had she not met the fortune-teller. I don't believe there is some predetermined life written for us in the stars before we're born.

With that being said, I will admit that Beatrice could have been better about keeping an eye out for potential catastrophe. I mean, if someone tells you your true love might die tragically, even if you think that person is a complete charlatan, you might want to be a little more vigilant about protecting that loved one.

When I was a teenager, I had an astrologer do my chart, and she actually told me it pointed to the possibility that I would “lose one of my truest loves to an early death.” She said his name began with a *J*. I really don’t know what else to say about that, except that my husband’s name begins with an *S*.

### **What would be the title of your writing journal, and why?**

My journals do have titles! I have to admit I’m not as good at keeping a journal as I used to be when I was writing full-time. I was religious about it back then, before I started Bright Antenna Records (the indie label I run). The last journal I remember finishing was called *I Know You Are but What Am I*. It was the tentative title of a book I was working on at the time, one that ended up being way too ridiculous and personal to publish.

### **What does your writing space look like?**

It depends on the book. I wrote *God-Shaped Hole* while living in a cozy house in Topanga Canyon. Scott and I shared an office in that house. We were both writers, and we had these cool matching Steelcase desks that we’d found at a flea market in Santa Monica. It was a good time in our lives. We were also planning our wedding then.

I wrote the majority of my second novel, *How to Kill a Rock Star*, in the Trident Café in Boulder, Colorado. It's one of my favorite cafes in the country and holds a very special place in my heart.

I'm working on a new novel as we speak, and most of it is being written in the Mill Valley Public Library. It's the most beautiful spot to write! High ceilings, lots of glass, a big fireplace, and a view of a redwood forest out the back windows. The library is a short walk from my house and also conveniently located right between where I live and where I get coffee every morning, so it works out really well.

**Which authors inspire you and why?**

So many authors have inspired me over the years. Henry Miller, Charles Bukowski, Dave Eggers, Tim Sandlin, Joan Didion, John Fante, Simon Van Booy, Miriam Toews, Tim O'Brien, Toni Morrison, Harper Lee, Donna Tart, James Baldwin, Sylvia Plath, Willy Vlautin, Vendela Vida. I could go on and on for days with this list. When I first started writing, I was drawn to writers like Miller and Bukowski because their work is so truthful and in your face. My heart responds to that kind of art, whether it be a book, a painting, or a song. I love anything that makes me feel connected to my humanity and to the humanity of others.

**If there's one thing you'd like readers to take away from *God-Shaped Hole*, what would it be?**

What feels more accurate is to say that I wish for the book

to resonate with readers. The books I've read in my life that have had the most enduring impact on me are books that I connected with on a deeply personal level, books that articulate thoughts and feelings I've had but never knew how to put into words. A great example of that for me would be *Shantaram* by Gregory David Roberts. I ordered that novel online right after it came out in 2003, after reading an intriguing review of it, and when it showed up in the mail, it was this thousand-plus-page doorstop, basically. I remember thinking, "Damn, I'm never going to read this." And then I opened it and read the first paragraph, and it had me in tears. The book summed up all the feelings I had inside of me in that moment in a way that made me feel as though I had found it for a reason. I read the book obsessively for days, every chance I got, until I finished it. It made me feel less alone. So, I guess I just answered the question. If I had to say what I want readers to take away from *God-Shaped Hole*, it would be that. I want this book to make them feel less alone.